

The Winter of Jarrow
By Danny Cove

Monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, Kingdom of Northumbria
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I cinched my robe tighter about myself as the cold wind bled in through the open window. As it crawled along the stone, it almost seemed to whisper for a moment before dying down into more of the silence which these days seemed to define all of existence beyond the outer walls. From my vantage point, I was able to peer over them, seeing the great expanse of...nothing. Nothing but a cold mist waited beyond that border as if the power of God himself were holding it at bay. I pursed my eyes, trying to pierce that pale shroud, to see what things moved in that chaotic silence, but my sight found nothing to grasp.

I nearly leapt out the window in alarm as something tapped me from behind. Frantically, I spun around, my back now to the open air, and I saw the specter of death staring at me from beneath the shadows of a dark brown hood, its pale, grey eyes focused intently on my own. But the Bible cradled in the creature's claws threw me off, for specters do not carry scriptures, as Father Ehrlen often said. I slumped my shoulders in relief as the shadows cleared, revealing the gaunt appearance of Brother Lennox, whose hood was pulled up tight as if he were afraid that the cold would erode whatever was left of his skeletal frame. "Why do you sneak up on people like that?" I hissed, hoping that a look of false bravado would conceal the feeling that my heart had nearly stopped.

"That was not my intent," Brother Lennox answered me, his voice low and soft. "Would it be safe to assume you were so lost in your prayers that you simply didn't hear me?"

"Let's pretend that that's the case," I said with a half-grin on my face.

"I don't believe you'll see any of them out there."

“Any of who?” I asked, but before I even started the question, Brother Lennox’s hand was pointing out the window and into the fog. I sighed, knowing who he was talking about even before he said the dreaded words.

“The North Men.”

All of us in the monastery knew of them. Most of us had been here during the last attack, when they had walked out of a fog very similar to this one, lumbering as tall as giants and as pale as ghosts. Following that attack, we had a month of ceaseless funerals for all the villagers they’d cruelly murdered. “Even if they come,” Brother Lennox went on. “They cannot breach our gates. Jarrow will not fall so long as that gate stays closed.”

“They have turned our monastery into a prison,” I griped.

“It is not a prison. It is a fortress, dedicated to God for the protection of his people.”

“What do you think they are?” I asked after a few silent moments of watching the fog swirl along the wall, as if searching for a crack to fell our Jericho. “Are they the spirits of the pagan dead?”

Lennox nearly laughed at that remark. “Leave that folklore in the minds of the unchurched. Keep your nose in the scriptures, not the legends.”

“The Nephilim, then?”

“The what?”

“The giants from the book of Genesis,” I described. “Before the flood, it was said that angels came to Earth and mated with human women, producing the giant Nephilim.”

“Yes, I know of the Nephilim,” Lennox sighed. “But there would be none left after the flood wiped the Earth clean. Trust me, brother, there are no Nephilim today.”

“But according to the book of Enoch, the spirits of the Nephilim survived the flood,” I sputtered on, my tongue moving faster than my mind could keep up. “It’s said that they became the demons which have plagued God’s people since that time. If that’s the case, then would it not be reasonable for them to lay siege to his people even here in Jarrow?”

“The book of Enoch is an apostate relic that’s been forbidden for centuries, and you’d be best to forget anything about it, especially if Father Ehrlen is around.” Brother Lennox glanced around nervously at the mention of Enoch and Ehrlen in the same sentence. He took a deep breath then, letting it out slowly as he pulled his hood back ever so slightly. “That being said, it does make sense that the devil’s armies would attack an estate as rich as ours. Perhaps it is our own greed which attracted them here in the first place. After all, greed is not far from wealth.”

I stayed silent for another moment, my eyes transfixed on the white wall which met our own. Sensing that Lennox was still there, I chose to continue. “Brother Basilus has learned about the North Men from some of the things they left behind in Lindisfarne.”

“Lindisfarne? I thought it was plundered to the foundation. All the brothers there were either murdered or taken as slaves.”

“They left a few things behind. Some stones, broken bits of a ship. Brother Basilus found them in the wreckage and brought them here.” I cleared my throat. “The North Men have a fear of what Basilus can only call Frost Giants, the enemies of their gods.”

“What kind of giants could frighten these giants who plague us?”

I shrugged. “Bigger ones.”

Lennox shook his head. “Mere legends, brother, to be ignored. The scriptures are where your attention should be.”

“What if these North Men became the very giants which they fear? Perhaps their legends are really only their fear of what they might...did...become?”

At this, Lennox laid his most recent manuscript on the sill of the window and rubbed his hand along the spine, inlaid as it was with traces of gold and silver ink. “We have amassed so much in this place,” he spoke softly. “Sometimes I look at the villagers, at how much they toil, and I wonder if perhaps we have not become the very demons we fear.”

“Such thoughts are not good for you, brother,” I spoke as I picked up the Bible and handed it back to him. “You’d do best to keep your mind in the scriptures.” Taking his Bible back, Lennox pulled his hood and disappeared without a sound beyond the nearest corridor.

I turned back to the fog, this time seeing more than just the regular swirls and echoes of silence. There was something out there, some shape or form standing just beyond the wall. It looked almost human, though impossibly tall, and the color of the fog. To one side of it, there hovered what looked to be the head of an axe. Then the fog moved across it and the figure disappeared. I took a step back and thought of the Frost Giants that even the North Men fear. Feeling another bite from the cold wind, I wondered if perhaps such beings were what brought the chill of winter. The days were getting shorter now, the skies darker and the ground more frozen with each passing day. Then, for the briefest of moments, I considered welcoming in the wintry giants, even if only to hold off the ghosts of the North Men.